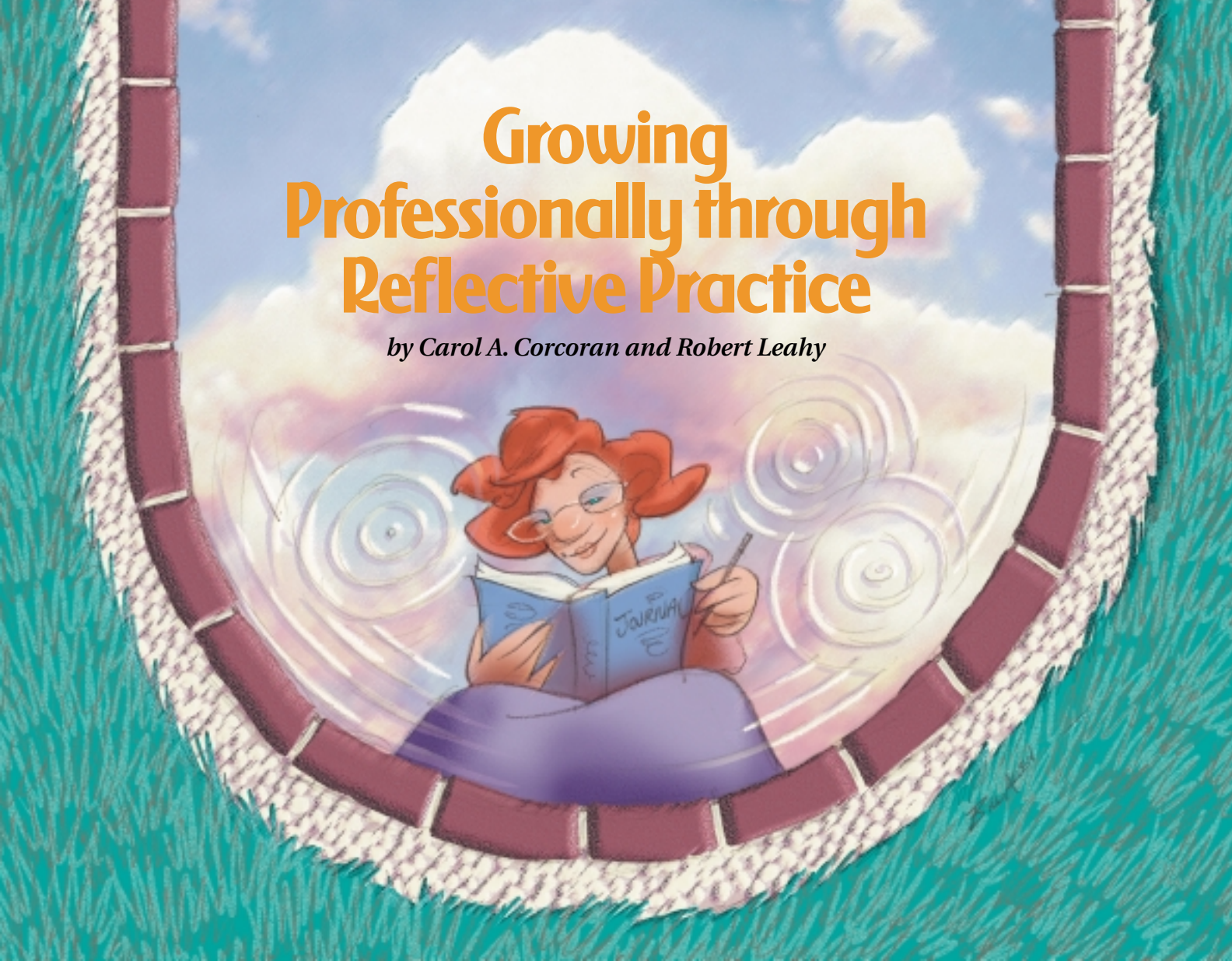


Growing Professionally through Reflective Practice

by Carol A. Corcoran and Robert Leahy



When beginning teachers stay reflective, they help themselves develop into effective professionals.

Although covering the subject matter is important, there's much more to teaching. To be effective, a teacher also must understand motivation, learning strategies, and metacognition (Darling-Hammond 2000). Teaching is so multifaceted, in fact, that learning to teach requires several years of experience after a person begins to practice (Scherer 2001).

Once the basics are learned, teaching requires ongoing mastery. To maintain professional growth, teachers must develop an orienta-

tion to their work that includes reflection and renewal (Steffy and Wolfe 1997). In the absence of these factors, teaching can become too automatic, which can undermine its effectiveness. Schön (1983) described a "knowing-in-practice" (practical knowledge) that may become so tacit, spontaneous, and automatic (overlearned) that teachers develop a narrowness and rigidity that affects their understandings of situations. To correct this situation (overlearning), Schön (1983, 61) recommended reflection—when a

teacher "can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice."

This article examines the importance of building a practical knowledge base, developing an inquiry orientation, being learner-centered, and experiencing social support, all critical components of reflective practice. Further, tips are offered for how preservice teachers can break the habits that keep them from becoming effective and reflective educators.

Starting Out

Learning how to become an effective teacher is a complex and difficult process. Some have even suggested that it takes from five to eight years to develop the teaching expertise needed to be successful in the classroom (Scherer 2001). But how do you gain this expertise?

Steffy and Wolfe (1997) identified six phases of teacher growth as part of a developmental continuum of a career teacher: novice, apprentice, professional, expert, distinguished, and emeritus. During all phases of this continuum, reflection is said to be critical to the development of the skills necessary to be effective in the classroom. This article focuses on the novice and apprentice phases of teacher development—specifically on how beginning teachers can stay reflective throughout their careers.

The first phase identified by Steffy and Wolfe (1997) begins whenever students enter the field as part of their teacher education program. Some programs include early and continuous field experience throughout the teacher education program, while other programs may not require students to enter the field until (or just before) the student teaching experience. The point is, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, the novice phase begins as preservice teachers enter the classroom to observe and work with master teachers. This phase continues throughout their programs and into student teaching, and it may even extend into a teacher induction program. As one student stated, "At the beginning, with no teaching experience, it's like, 'oh well, this is easy stuff.' Then you get in there, especially interning, and it's like, this is not working!"

As described by Steffy and Wolfe (1997), novice teachers are hesitant, unsure, and lacking confidence in their own abilities. The focus for these preservice teachers may be on surviving, on not appearing ignorant, and on trying to impress others (peers as well as instructors). That the novice teacher's performance may be graded might also be a factor. Whatever the reason, novice teachers may suffer from a sense of vulnerability that may discourage reflection. During this phase, they need lots of guidance and support as they grow in their practical knowledge and develop a reflective orientation toward teaching.

The second stage, or apprentice phase, usually starts during the student teaching experience and continues through the first few years of teaching in one's own classroom (Steffy and Wolfe 1997). This is when students rush back to campus after teaching to share stories about what worked or didn't work. These students (and former students) are passionate about what they are doing. They tend to be idealistic, motivated, and open to new ideas (Steffy and Wolfe 1997). Without the guidance of knowledgeable mentors at this phase, preservice teachers may not develop their thinking beyond a descriptive level to higher levels of reflection (Yost, Sentner, and Forlenza-Bailey 2000).

Practical Knowledge

Teachers, as professionals, need an extensive knowledge base from which to make decisions. Keith (1986) stated that teachers fail not from a lack of content knowledge, but from a lack of practical knowledge. Teachers use practical knowledge to express pur-

poses, give shape and meaning to their experiences, and structure social realities. Such knowledge allows expert teachers to go back into their memory banks to compare situations and make decisions about guiding professional practice (Scherer 2001; Darling-Hammond 2000).

Inquiry Orientation

A reflective orientation to teaching requires attention to one's own actions in relation to intentions. It is an inquiry approach to dealing with complex and evolving educational problems. To be reflective means that teachers already have a set of well-thought-out beliefs and assumptions, or an overarching theory (Schön 1983), which guides their practice. Teachers reflecting on their practice are constantly and rationally selecting a given option or course of action with a careful analysis of the possible consequences of those decisions and judgments on student learning (Leahy and Corcoran 1996; Risko, Vukelich, Roskos, and Carpenter 2002).

Reflection is not simply a matter of thinking back on actions taken. Everyone, at times, thinks

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back on situations—sometimes pleased with prior actions, sometimes wishing things had been done differently. Effective teachers look for internal logical consistency and inconsistency between their espoused beliefs (overarching theory) and actions taken. Kottkamp (1990, 183) described it as “a cycle of paying deliberate, analytical attention to one’s own action in relation to intentions, as if from an external observer’s perspective, for the purpose of expanding one’s options and making decisions about improved ways of acting in the future, or in the midst of the action itself.” Emphasizing the importance of this orientation to the building of teaching expertise, Steffy and Wolfe (1997) cautioned that teachers may experience professional withdrawal if the reflection-renewal-growth cycle is broken.

Learner-Centered

Teaching is an active process based on a professional examining his or her own actions and the possible links to specific actions of learners. Despite time constraints and the demands of the prescribed curriculum, teachers must focus on the diverse learners and what they need to be successful in the classroom (Darling-Hammond 2000).

Effective teachers set priorities and examine the purpose of activities and the curriculum. They ask questions such as: How is the student thinking about this? What is the meaning of his or her confusion? And what does the student already know how to do? Effective teachers accept responsibility for their students’ learning—listening to students and watching them as instruction oc-

curs and then later analyzing why things worked or didn’t work. To improve student learning, teachers must consider both immediate and long-term consequences.

Social Support

Reflection requires a public testing of private assumptions (Schön 1983), which happens through a dialogue of words or actions with other participants in the



teaching-learning context. Schön (1983) suggested that teachers need this assistance from others so that they can see what they may have avoided seeing. Effective teachers learn from their own setbacks as well as successes in the classroom. Through honest reflection on theory and practice, teachers can find new and different answers to their recurring questions (Leahy and Corcoran 1996).

Helpful Practices

Exercises, such as multiple lesson plans, journal article summaries, and reflection journals, often are recommended as tools for reflection and have been found to be effective. Comments from preservice students reveal the benefits of these tools

during this stage of growth. About class assignments, one student commented, “It’s traumatizing! You write a paper and you reflect on it, or you reflect on somebody else’s work . . . or we do our observations and we’d have to come back and talk about them or reflect on what we thought.” Another shared, “At first journals were a difficult thing for me to do because it was kind of exposing myself a little bit, and that made things a little touchy for me. But, I found that it was of great benefit to me.”

For many, reflection can be uncertain and troubling. For preservice teachers, reflection also can be difficult because they don’t have a lot of experience and may not be sure on what to reflect. Using some format for how to reflect can be beneficial. Also helpful for preservice teachers is to hear master teachers share their reflections, to participate in discussions, and to express their developing ideas. The more opportunities preservice teachers have to interact with others, the greater the number of occasions for feedback, leading to reconsideration of their own thinking.

In addition, preservice teachers need to learn how to structure their own responses to others during discussions. Responding with advice, constructive criticism, or praise inhibits the reflective process (Kottkamp 1990). Instead, novice teachers must learn to pose helpful responses. This requires teachers to learn paraphrasing skills (or descriptive feedback) so that the attention can be on the stated ideas.

Apprentice teachers generally are more learner-centered than novice teachers. As such, these new teachers need to develop and

maintain reflective practices through such exercises as conducting case studies, assembling portfolios, discussing issues in seminars and dyads, and conducting action research projects. Mentoring programs within the school system are especially appropriate, particularly when the school environment is conducive to promoting open sharing. Proper support by mentors is necessary to help new teachers move

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from the role of protégé to a true peer (Monsour 2003). If apprentice teachers are not fully supported and engaged in the reflection-renewal-growth process, they may “begin to withdraw from students, colleagues, and the profession” (Steffy and Wolfe 1997, 8).

Don't Let Habits Take Over

When the newness of teaching disappears (somewhere around the third or fourth year), novice and apprentice teacher may begin to feel “good” about their teaching. Actually, however, all they may have learned is how to cope; they may simply have established a set of routines and procedures that seem to work with some difficult situations. Coping mechanisms are not, in and of themselves, good. Teach-

ers should caution against becoming so comfortable with their teaching that they don't question what they do and why.

As Schön (1983) warned, teachers can easily get caught up in the fast-paced world of practice. They tend to do things that “seem” to work or that they've done before (and survived). Teachers develop habits. Yet, habits are ways of responding that people do without thinking! In contrast, effective teachers need to recognize what they value and what their practice says about themselves as educators.

Successful teachers are fully engaged in the reflective process. In addition, they are intentional, responsible, and committed to growing professionally throughout their careers. Finally, to improve their own performance, they make time to consider what they do day-to-day.

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Ways to Maintain a Reflective Approach to Teaching

If you are an apprentice teacher, here are some ways that you can maintain a reflective approach to your teaching:

- Contact a former teacher who inspired you during your education—someone whose philosophical approach you share. Initiate a “pen-pal” (or an e-mail) relationship through which you can share anecdotes, lesson plans, and aspirations.

- Keep a personal journal in which you summarize successful or failed lessons so that you can reflect on what worked and what needs improvement.

- Videotape classroom activities to create a record of selective teaching events. After you overcome the initial shock of seeing yourself teach, you can notice details of style and mannerisms that help or impede teaching.

- Invite a trusted experienced colleague to observe your teaching. Generally, the invitation will be flattering to the observing teacher and is likely to elicit meaningful dialogue about teaching.

- Summarize key principles from your teaching; for example, “Students should be actively involved in the learning process.” Then summarize events during the day that demonstrate commitment to your principles.